Atlee, Truman, and Stalin at Potsdam.

U.S. Army

The Trouble with Strategy: Bridging Policy and Operations

By RICHARD K. BETTS

No subject generates more concern within the military than strategy. Yet policymakers are often indifferent to it. Some find the demand for more and better strategy to be naive resistance to inevitable ad hocery. Why is the subject never settled enough to allow leaders to get on with other business? Why do senior officers insist on clear strategy more than do civilian officials?

Richard K. Betts is the Leo A. Shifrin professor of war and peace studies at Columbia University and the editor of *Conflict After the Cold War: Arguments on Causes of War and Peace.*

Everything in War

What Clausewitz said of friction in war applies to strategy: it "is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult."[1] The trouble begins with the term *strategy* which is a buzzword that covers a multitude of sins. Many were content with a limited conception in earlier times—planning and directing large-scale military operations. Clausewitz, however, injected politics when he defined strategy as "the use of an engagement for the purpose of the war."[2] This wedge properly pushes the concept to higher levels. But some usages of the term become so broad that they are synonymous with foreign policy.

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Military professionals tend to handle the ambiguity by differentiating between national and military strategy. The first is supposed to drive the second. This division is reasonable in some ways but on balance creates as many problems as it solves. It evokes a fundamental tension in civil-military relations. What is called national strategy in the Pentagon and grand strategy by many historians and theorists so overlaps policy that it is hard to distinguish them. The difference between ends and means becomes muddled from the outset. To keep concepts clear, it is less useful to think of three realms—policy, strategy, and operations—than to think of strategy as the *bridge* between policy and operations. A bridge allows elements on either side to move to the other. As a plan that bridges the realms of policy and operations, effective strategy must integrate political and military criteria rather than separate them.

Resistance to this notion has recurred frequently, especially among military leaders who seek to keep policy and operations in separate compartments. The objection is exemplified by Helmuth von Moltke ("the Elder"): "Strategy serves politics best by working for its aim, but by retaining maximum independence in the achievement of this aim. Politics should not interfere in operations."[3] This is a common view among those in uniform, but it puts strategy on a slippery slope and tends to shove it downward, subordinating it to operations—the pathology that made Moltke's successors complicit in the destruction of their own country as well as much of Europe as they piled up tactically brilliant successes at the price of strategic catastrophe in two world wars. When the integration of policy and operations is not resisted in principle, it is often resisted in practice, with the ends of the bridge—policymakers and military operators—each believing that strategic integration means simply doing it their way.

Civilian leaders rarely give conscious thought to whether objectives and operations should be integrated or separated. Some are happy to accept the view prevalent in the military that political decision and military implementation should be discreet functions, sequential and independent, so leaders can pronounce what they wish and unleash soldiers to do as they see fit. This is consistent with the Moltke view. Such an approach eases civil-military friction and sometimes works, but it risks rude surprises. Others believe in integrating political and military decisions but without grasping the ramifications for their own responsibilities. Political leaders who do justice to the view of strategy as integration must understand a fair amount about

military operations in order to judge what demands can reasonably be made. Hardly any politicians have such knowledge or the time and willingness to acquire it.

The Body Politic

Military and civilian leaders have different expertise and duties. Professional soldiers often see politicians as irresponsible when policymakers prescribe strategy in a way that meddles in operational plans. The complexity of modern military operations evokes an engineering mentality—a compulsion to find formulas and axioms so that strategy can be carried out, in a sense, by the numbers. This is a natural urge in a business where mistakes from playing fast and loose can get people killed.

Formulaic strategy, however, is effectively antipolitical. It aims to nail things down and close options, while politics—especially in a democracy—strives to keep options open and avoid constraints. Politicians seek ways to keep divergent interests satisfied, which means avoiding difficult commitments until absolutely necessary and being ready to shift course quickly. Thus at its core, the notion of strategy by formula, strategy set in advance and buffered against demands to change course, is as naive as uninformed politicians acting as armchair generals.

Keeping national and military strategy in discreet compartments can become an excuse to avoid making real strategy. Such a split makes one part much the same as policy and the other much like doctrine and operations. This leaves open the gap between policy objectives and military plans—the gap that should be bridged by strategic calculation for exactly *how* to use force to produce a desired political result rather than just a military result.

This confusion is common. A military strategy that efficiently destroys targets is successful in operational terms but a failure in policy if it does not compel an enemy government. Or when professionals speak of a "strategy/force structure mismatch," they usually mean a gap between forces and preferred operational plans rather than between capabilities and the *purpose* of a war. Relabeling policy and operations as national strategy and military strategy, and dividing responsibility, can leave the strategic gap unfilled while pretending something is there.

For a superpower like the United States, a strategic gap sets up the conditions for the lament that we won the battles but lost the war. The logical hierarchy of policy and operations all too easily becomes inverted when integrated strategy is absent or fails to provide a plan that works as its planners expect. Operations come to drive policy instead of serving policy. This inversion has by no

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Pearl Harbor.

means been unusual. Historian Russell Weigley concludes that it has become typical, writing darkly that war has ceased to be the extension of politics and that it creates "its own momentum" and undermines the purposes for which it is launched, and that instead of the servant of politics, war has become master.[4]

There can be no easy formula for turning military action into political outputs. The purpose of war is to impose one's will on an enemy. It is about who rules when the shooting stops. This is closely related to victory in military operations but is not the same. Unless one completely conquers an enemy's territory, extinguishes its government, and rules directly as an occupying power, it is not a straightforward matter to translate operational success into desired enemy behavior in the postwar world.

From a Different View

Despite the prevalent tendency of war to take on a life of its own, most still think of the classic model of a hierarchy of functions which proceed in sequence from one level to the next, from prewar planning, through wartime execution, to postwar activities (with policy governing strategic plans) which in turn drive operations and tactics, which win battles and campaigns—and finally produce victory and the policy objective. This standard conception might be called the linear model of war. The alternative is a circular model, where events in each phase generate feedback, altering the other functions. Results and unforeseen requirements of operations alter strategy, and changed requirements of strategy reshape political objectives. The circular model has more in common with chaos theory

than with the engineering orientation reflected in the linear model.

Practitioners usually think of strategy in terms of the linear model, but actual war usually resembles the circular. At its worst, straight-line thinking puts the operational cart before the political horse. Some divergence from the linear model is inevitable and sometimes has positive effects by allowing sensible adaptation to circumstances. In general, however, curtailing the degree to which the circular model takes over—limiting the extent to which military requirements override or deform initial political aims—is the measure of good strategy.

The U.S. Constitution is fundamentally antistrategic. Strategy implies coherence, consistency, and direct translation of preferences and calculations into plans and action: decide what you want, figure out how to get it, and do it. The Constitution, in contrast, fosters competition and clashes among preferences, estimates, and plans. Through the separation of executive and legislative powers, it provides a structure of government that blocks any center of authority from imposing a coherent plan if the others disagree. This in turn encourages compromises that fudge choices and move in different directions at once.

The Constitution also ensures that political leadership will turn over frequently on the executive level while the agencies and services below remain in place. Bureaucracies have both longer time horizons and narrower conceptions of interest than Presidents, making them more oriented to pondering a limited range of concerns and committing to firm plans, while political leaders are more general in how they think and more ad hoc in how they operate.

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All of this improves control in the sense of checks and balances, but not in consistency of action. It fosters the circular model once war is underway. Civilian politicians tend to operate instinctively by the circular model. They are accustomed to managing competing constituencies, building consensus, stitching together contradictory goals, and reacting to demands that emerge as policies unfold. Creative inconsistency is their stock in trade and they are adept at forging complicated alliances. They are not skilled at translating aims into outputs. That is why gaps between decision and implementation are chronic not just in the realm of defense policy but throughout the business of government.

Military leaders who rise to the top in Washington inevitably get exposed to these realities and resign themselves to them. But they do not like them because political chaos is antithetical to the military ethos, the engineering instinct, and the hierarchical essence of military organization. Unlike politicians, the military sees the political confusion of war not as the essence of democratic government but as an aberration that should be corrected so government can get back to orderly ways of doing business. It is temperamentally natural for professionals to see hierarchy, clarity, simplicity, precision, and sequencing—the things that make operational planning and execution work in their business—as the way things should work in the national security system as a whole.

Between Discipline and Instinct

In many respects a rational sequence is possible. The National Security Council (NSC) was originally designed to address these problems and enforce more order on the process of creating defense policy. Even this body, however, reflects the reality that political leaders who focus on objectives and military leaders who focus on operations pull strategy in two directions.

The council as we know it today is quite different and is in some respects opposed to what it was meant to be. In James Forrestal's original conception, it was designed to discipline the President by forcing him to systematically consider the views of the principal departments instead of running around in an ad hoc manner giving whatever orders struck his fancy. The main point of NSC was to provide a forum for strategic deliberation to inform the President and bring together the disparate strands of bureaucracy and expertise in State, Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the intelligence community.

The National Security Council itself still does this but it is not actually what we have come to think of as its role. The body technically consists of four members: the President, Vice President, and Secretaries of State and Defense (with the Director of Central Intelligence and Chairman as statutory advisers). This unit is hardly what is most significant anymore. Rather, many think the acronym NSC is not the council but its staff and, above all, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. These barely existed until more than a decade after the National Security Act was passed. They make the council in the minds of most not a forum to constrain the President but rather his arm to enforce his will on the departments.

Disparities have been more obvious at some times than others. They were most evident in the administration of Richard Nixon, when the President ignored the Department of State and ran foreign policy out of the White House, using

DOD (Thomas Leigue, Jr.)

Persian Gulf leadership.

Henry Kissinger as his point man. Such strong direction from the top is certainly conducive to the linear model of strategy, and that vision in the Nixon period saw dramatic breakthroughs in détente with Moscow and rapprochement with China that would probably never have developed as decisively or quickly if pursued through the normal process of political pulling and hauling and second guessing.

Strong direction from the top did not produce serious civil-military tensions because the President's tight control of diplomatic initiatives was not paralleled by similar direction of the military. The White House and the Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, afforded the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the services great latitude in charting their own courses within the general guidelines of foreign policy and budget ceilings. This followed the civil-military friction of the 1960s, when Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, along with their Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, controlled military operations to a degree that the Navy and Air Force considered outrageous interference.

Under both the Democrats in the 1960s and the Republicans in the 1970s, the policymaking system aimed at hierarchy and sequence, imposing strong direction from the top. The difference was that in the second case the White House did not work as hard at integrating military operations with policy direction, allowing more of a division of labor and separation of the two phases. But in the Nixon period, with few exceptions, the crucial strategic breakthroughs were in basic foreign policy. They did not involve military operations.

The White House acted differently when it came to strategic integration between foreign policy and diplomatic operations. In that realm Nixon and Kissinger showed even more disrespect for professional diplomatic expertise and prerogatives than Kennedy, Johnson, and McNamara had toward the military. The status of the Department of State was never more marginal than under William Rogers. Veteran diplomats saw the freewheeling interference from the White House as

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no less irresponsible than the military considered the picking of bombing targets by Johnson and McNamara. Gerard Smith, the U.S. representative to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, railed against Kissinger for engaging in secret back channel negotiations with Moscow that undercut the official delegation and, due to ignorance of certain technical details, nearly stumbled into an agreement that would have precluded the Minuteman III modernization program.[5]

The question is not just whether a classical model of sequential progression from policy to strategy to operations is practical. The point is that it is difficult to integrate policy and operations rather than separate them without having one side take over the whole show. Integration means blending two very different sets of concerns, orientations, and priorities, but officials at either end of the bridge are likely to see that as meaning the other side must accommodate. In short, defining strategy as the integration of policy and operations is a prescription for civil-military tension.

Friction can be avoided by accepting separation in the way Moltke advised—a division of labor in which policy or national strategy is set,

defining strategy as the integration of policy and operations is a prescription for civil-military tension

then the military takes over, genuflects to the guidance, and focuses on the appropriate military strategy. This can work, especially when either civilian or military leadership is particularly gifted. But it raises the odds that the linear sequence of decision will yield to a circular quality of implementation because operational requirements are more likely to ramify politically in unanticipated ways.

Balancing Act

What is a *good* example of strategymaking? The performance of the Bush administration in the Persian Gulf War comes closest if we include only the period *following* Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The full crisis combines evidence of both the best and the worst. Policy and strategy before the invasion were an abysmal failure. Bush made no serious attempt to deter Saddam Hussein from deciding to invade. If Ambassador April Glaspie's last meeting with Saddam was not a green light, it was barely a yellow one. Had the administration performed half as well in that phase, there might have been no war.

If we begin the assessment after August 1990 and assume that the objectives of Desert Storm were to expel Iraq from Kuwait and cripple Baghdad's ability to undertake aggression again, the Bush strategy worked effectively and efficiently. Iraq was routed at minimal cost to Washington,

and the United States and United Nations subjected it to unprecedented requirements for inspection and destruction of its weapons of mass destruction. American political and military leadership worked well together in integrating political aims and military requirements.

The administration did not make cavalier and inconsistent demands on the Joint Chiefs and U.S. Central Command, nor did it micromanage operations; but neither did it give the military *carte blanche*. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney was as intrusive as McNamara, closely assessing operational plans and disciplining those in uniform who strayed from his view of proper behavior. He fired General Michael Dugan, Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force, for indiscreet public comments that represented far less challenge to civilian authority than the near insubordination of Admiral George Anderson, Chief of Naval Operations, during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. The Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Brent Scowcroft, was also instrumental in rejecting the initial straight up the middle plan of General Norman Schwarzkopf for attack into Kuwait. Although some criticized General Colin Powell for being too politicized, the close relationships he had in both directions of the chain of command facilitated communication, deliberation, and planning.

Many believed the dictator could not survive the crushing military defeat, but they were wrong. Yet it is reckless to flunk the Bush strategy on those grounds. A strategy that would have guaranteed the ouster of Saddam would have been far riskier. Its costs would have risen as the odds of success fell. American forces would have had to take Baghdad, which in turn would have dramatically raised the probability of overshooting the culminating point of victory. Instead of fewer than two hundred U.S. combat fatalities, an infinitesimal number for a war of that scale, vastly more would have been likely. The tentative and fragile political coalition of the United States and Arab nations would have frayed if not collapsed. And there is no guarantee that a victory that got rid of Saddam Hussein would not have created new and equally troublesome political and diplomatic problems in the region. Most importantly, had Saddam been pushed to the wall, he might have resorted to employing chemical and biological weapons.

Choices and Conundrums

There are two basic challenges in devising strategy. The first is how to use force to achieve the political objective—how to get from the operational side of the bridge to the policy side. The

commentary

the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow."[6]

The United States could in theory have pursued a strategy that would have won in Vietnam. It could have sent a million troops, invaded and occupied the North, imprisoned or killed the communist cadre in the North and the South and all who sympathized with them, and destroyed every uncooperative village to, as Tacitus put it, make a desert and call it peace. But such an *effective* strategy was never considered by any but a few fanatics because the price was unacceptable. As it was, American strategy worked as long as the United States was willing to stay at war; it just did not offer a way to peace without defeat.

In cases such as Kosovo, muddled policy obscures the line between a strategy's success or failure. NATO obviously won the war against Serbia in some important senses, but at the price of compromising its objectives and boxing itself into a postwar occupation with no ready way out. The agreement that ended the war accepted Milosevic's condition that Kosovo remain under Belgrade's sovereignty. Combat was terminated by leaving NATO with three unpalatable choices: indefinite occupation of Kosovo; giving Kosovo independence, thus violating the peace agreement; or giving Kosovo back to Yugoslavia, betraying the Albanians for whom the war was fought in the first place. Should a military campaign that leaves this political result be deemed a strategic success?

Guidelines

Recommendations for good strategymaking are offered more easily than they are carried out. Nevertheless, it is striking how rarely policymakers and commanders put their heads together on these points explicitly, let alone carefully. But if they can get at least that far, there are steps that might shave down the likelihood of failure.

Estimate the culminating point of victory. In Korea in 1950 the culminating point was probably the Inchon landing and restoration of South Korea up to the 38th Parallel, before the march to the Yalu and Chinese intervention. In Iraq in 1991 it was not far beyond where policymakers decided it was—although breakdowns in communication in the field and between the field and Washington prevented coalition forces from closing the gate and destroying the Republican Guard before the ceasefire.

Determine an exit strategy. This is not to be confused with an exit date. By what criteria will we know when the mission is accomplished, and how are operations designed to meet them? The most recent example of failure in this respect is the occupation of Bosnia.

Patrol in Kosovo.

55th Signal Company (Martin J. Cervantez)

second is how to do so at acceptable cost. The first, while daunting, is easier for a superpower than for most countries. The handy thing about having surplus power is that you can be careless and still get where you want to go. Efficiency and effectiveness are not the same.

Effectiveness, however, is not the only test of strategy. Clausewitz made that point when he wrote something seemingly obvious but often forgotten: "Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds

Decide the ceiling on acceptable costs and link it to the exit strategy. Too often, as with bidders at an auction, policymakers pay more than they intended. They make the irrational but understandable mistake of letting sunk costs rather than prospective additional costs induce them to up the ante. The limit of reasonable costs in Vietnam was probably reached no later than 1963.

Such guidelines are easy to proclaim, but strategic decisions are made by harried officials who do not always consult Clausewitz. Politicians have to juggle conflicting concerns and are more accustomed to compromise and near-term solutions than to following checklists of general principles. Commanders easily get swallowed up in the business of keeping the military machine running rather than cogitating about vague matters of state. All these guideline tasks should be carried out, but only extraordinary people do many of them at a given time, and none do all of them all the time.

Stating guidelines is ineffectual unless they can be worked into standard procedures for the military side and comfortable political modes of

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operation for the policy side. But it is often not clear that either good or bad strategic behavior can be attributed to the process—that is, the way the NSC system functioned and civil-military interaction proceeded. Perhaps procedures in the Bush system were better than under Johnson, but this is not obvious. There is no reason to believe that anything in the Bush process, had it been in place in the 1960s, would have saved the day in Vietnam. Indeed, it was largely that experience which provided the mindsets and checklists that the Bush administration carried into the crisis of 1990–91. And it was the luck of facing an enemy utterly vulnerable to modern conventional military power that accounted for most of the difference in outcome between the Bush and Johnson strategies.

Problems of strategy are not due to the structure of the current system nor even to the constitutional dispersion of power. They originate in the convictions of powerful individuals and the temper of the times—hubris and ambition in periods of great national success and pessimism in periods of failure. Regarding the power of specific people, no prescribed process can prevent a President and his closest advisors from becoming viscerally committed to a particular course unless there is strong disagreement on the part of the

larger body politic. Success and hubris, however, foster permissive consensus and overconfidence. This cuts off the most important chance to avoid failure. Pessimism poses different risks. It may let pass opportunities that should be exploited. But at least it fits well with the recognition that in strategy "the simplest thing is difficult." **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 119.

[2] Ibid., p. 177.

[3] Helmuth von Moltke, *Moltkes Kriegslehren*, excerpted from *War*, edited by Lawrence Freedman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 219.

[4] Russell F. Weigley, "The Political and Strategic Dimensions of Military Effectiveness," *Military Effectiveness*, volume 3: *The Second World War*, edited by Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1988), p. 341.

[5] Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk: The Story of SALT I* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 413–17.

[6] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 92.